

NUMBER 2 MELROSE SQUARE.

A STORY IN TWO CHAPTERS.

It was not a cheerful place; but, as my friend wrote me, when I asked her to find me nice apartments near the Museum, a furnished house in a square, and with a servant included, for positively less money than you would pay for three rooms in anything like a decent street, was a thing to be grasped at, not despised; especially as I could be so much more my own mistress than in the latter place, and I could ask Tom and Hester up from their barracks quarters to spend Christmas with me. So I tried to shut my eyes to the exterior look of things and went inside. Here there was one improvement at least—the yellow gauze was gone. I had stripped it off the mirror the last thing before the house in the morning, as also from the glass in the drawing-room, which, though the gilding of the frame was decidedly shabby, was to my great amusement as carefully guarded as the other. I went up to the latter apartments after dinner. Mrs. Cathers had suggested that "Of course I would not do so, but the dining-parlors were so much more cozy," but I did not agree with Mrs. Cathers. That orange paper with its maroon stripes, and the grim old engraving of Judas, with the horrible expression of a traitor, and the sinister leering faces of the high priests and elders, were depressing to my spirits. The very force and realism of the picture made me feel as if the room were one in which it would be possible to plot a crime. Besides, a house in which a drawing-room is unused, except for company, is never a cozy, or home-like one to me; and I knew that Hester felt still more strongly on the subject. I was determined that she should find me and my work-basket and books established there as a matter of course when she came.

Neither books nor work were much called into requisition on the present evening, however. There was a pleasant fire burning in the grate, and two candles on the little round table by the sofa, where the last number of the Cornhill, with a new novel, lay awaiting my perusal; but a day's continuous writing and my dinner combined had made me sleepy, and after reading a few pages and finding that I was getting into a dreamy state, and mixing up the cracklings of the fire with the roar of surf on a sunny beach, and my own position on the sofa with that of the Scottish heroine in a fiat-flying cutter, I gave it up, blew out the candles, and composed myself for a nap till tea-time.

Do these details appear irrelevant to you? They are not so in reality. I mention them to show you that nothing of what I may afterwards relate can be accounted for (as has been falsely suggested) by my being in an excited, overwrought state, worked up by loneliness or the writing and reading of sensational romances. I was in perfect health. I had lived alone for weeks and sometimes months, when my dear mother was visiting her married children. I had been simply following my regular profession, which this day lay in the translating a number of dry, scientific, rigidly matter-of-fact letters; had walked home, eaten a plain dinner, and read myself comfortably to sleep with one of our healthiest and most brilliant English writer's descriptions of sea-coast scenery. Bear this in mind as I wish you to do, and then listen to what follows:

I woke from my nap with a start, caused by the falling of coal into the fender. How long I had slept I could not tell; but I had that instinctive consciousness, which I dare say most people have experienced, that it was a long time, much longer than I had intended; and this opinion was confirmed by the sight of the tea things standing on the table, where Mrs. Cathers had evidently placed them without arousing me, and also of the fact that when I touched the tea-pot I found it was almost stone cold. Vexed with myself, I rose quickly to my feet and began putting the fire together, for it had got so low and dead that the room was almost dark. Indeed, I feared at first that there was not sufficient vitality in it to light a candle, and so enable me to see what time it was, and whether it was worthwhile beginning my occupation; but a few skillful touches with the poker soon dispelled this idea, and produced a bright, wavering flame, and I stood up again, meaning to get a spill from the mantel-piece and light it at once. As I did so, my glance naturally fell on my own face in the mirror before me, and I said to myself aloud, and smiling as one sometimes will when alone: "Well, Miss Mary Liddell, you have made your head into a furze-bush! It's a mercy Mrs. John isn't here to see you, or—" My voice broke off suddenly at that word; for in the act of uttering it, and smiling to myself at my dishevelledness, as I have said, I saw that I was not alone in the room.

Standing at the further end of it, almost opposite to the grate, and reflected in the mirror by the ruddy light, was a woman; a woman I had never seen before. That she had not been there five minutes back when I awoke I could almost have sworn; for I had looked all around the room; and as dim as the light was, I could see well enough that there was no one else in it, and that the door was closed. It was closed now, and how she could have opened and shut it again without me hearing her, unless during the moment that I was poking the fire, I could not imagine. The curious thing was that she did not look at or speak to me even now, but stood perfectly still her face turned toward the door as if in the attitude of listening, and with all the appearance of a person belonging to the house, seeing that she was not dressed for walking, but in a loose sort of morning gown of white cambric, with deep ruffles down in front and at the wrists, and wore her hair loosely plaited down her back. I noticed this at first glance as adding to the strangeness of her presence there at all; but in the same moment the fire shot up in a brilliant flame, throwing a bright light on her face and almost nailing me to the ground as my eye read the expression on it. In all the years I have lived, in all the years I may have yet before me, I never have seen, I trust I never may see, such an expression on any human being's face again! For it was a young face, that of a girl, almost a child, and would have been pretty, but for the awful, corpse-like pallor which overshadowed the brow and cheeks, and the hopeless, unutterable depth of misery and fear, the utter despair and ghastly, speechless, livid horror, all blended into one single effort, an intensity of listening, which seemed to absorb every nerve and power; listening to something outside the door, something which seemed from her starting eyeballs and the hopeless quiver of the lower jaw to be drawing nearer and nearer; for her slender, feeble body seemed to shiver with each breath, and draw itself farther and farther back, as though from some loathsome, terrible animal which she could see in act to spring, or as though—it was all visible in the sudden leaping of that flame. The next moment it died down again, and I turned round sharply!

The woman was gone!

How I felt I can not tell you. It has taken many words to write all this, but it did not require the space of one minute to see it. It must have taken you many seconds to read, but it did not take a dozen heart-beats to feel it in all its ghastly, inexplicable mystery. I was still breathless with the surprise of seeing her there, there in my room, which only a moment before had been empty save of myself; and she was gone—disappeared! The door had not been opened. There was no sound, no cry, not even the slightest footfall. The house seemed wrapped in the most impenetrable silence. Even the noises in the street were hushed; and I was there alone in the firelight with the unlit spill in my hand. I suppose I rang the bell violently; for I remember listening to the sound of its jingling far away in the basement regions, and then ringing again and again, and waiting, with my heart beating like an alarm clock, and my hands quite cold and damp, for Mrs. Cathers to answer it.

She made her appearance at last. It may not have been as long as it seemed. One does not tell time accurately at such moments; but it was long enough to give me time to recover myself a little, and to feel annoyed with the woman for the marked sullenness and unwillingness in her whole manner as she entered with the conventional query, "Did you ring, ma'am?" She was carrying a large kerosene lamp, and the sudden glare of light, as well as the sound of her voice, surly as it was, restored me further.

"I should think you heard me ring several times," I answered. "Did you meet any one on the stairs just now?" I have been asleep longer than I intended, and I did not hear the door open; but—"

"Yes, ma'am, you've been asleep," Mrs. Cathers interrupted me, in a tone of greater injury than before. "And if I didn't answer of your bell the minute it rung, it was in cause of my being tired of waiting 'n' I'd dropt into a doze myself a-sittin' in my cheer. Praps, ma'am, you don't know as it's twelve o'clock?"

"Twelve o'clock!" I repeated. Had I slept so long? "Why did you not wake me when you brought up the tea?" I added, looking at the woman in surprise.

"Why, ma'am," she said, peevishly, "I would have done so, in course, if you hadn't said at dinner as you were tired, and when I come up as you were sleeping, so sound I didn't like. Dreamin' I should think you was too, by your 'air," the woman put in, with a sudden, furtive glance at me.

I had not been able to catch her eyes once before. She kept them rigidly fixed on the lamp she carried, never even looking about her; and, indeed, there was something now so unpleasant in her glance that I felt almost unwilling to go on speaking to her. Still, if any one had got into the house without my knowledge—any one of feeble mind or in great terror! Writing this as though I were in the witness box, I can solemnly aver that so free was my mind from any morbid or romantic fancies, that even then I could not think of my visitor as having any supernatural element.

"Have you let any one into the house without my knowledge?" I asked, rather sharply; "or is the hall door open. If you have been asleep yourself you might not hear any one come in at it; but I believe some one did just now—a woman. She was in this room a few minutes ago."

Mrs. Cathers looked at me again, this time with barely veiled contempt.

"You 'ave been dreamin', ma'am," she said coolly. "The 'all door' Why, it 'as been shut an' locked ever since dusk, an' as to me lettin' any one in, I'd not think of such a thing. There ain't no one in this 'ouse but you and me, nor there hasn't been, man or woman either. Lor' to think what queer dreams some folks 'ave! But I thought as you were give that way when I 'eard you mumblyng to yourself in your sleep."

I did not believe her, for I knew that I had not been dreaming; and there was something in the woman's whole manner which made me distrustful of her, and more especially of her almost impertinent determination to force a ready-made solution of my query on me. Why should she be so anxious to persuade me that I had been dreaming, when, as a matter of fact, she could have no idea of my grounds for speaking as I did? On second thoughts, I decided to say no more on the subject at present; but, simply observing that she ought to have woken me sooner, told her to light me up to bed, and make haste to her own. I could not have staid longer just then in that drawing-room by myself, and I am perfectly willing to own that until I was safely in bed with my room door locked, I avoided looking about me as carefully as Mrs. Cathers had done. I was honestly frightened and bewildered, and my mind was in a whirl. It was a comfort to me when three, striking from a church-clock hard by, and followed by the crowing of an over-wakeful cock, showed me that the actual night was past, and gave me confidence enough to let me sleep.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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